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The attached speech was prepared for delivery by Harry S. Havens, but because of illness, the speech was delivered by Kenneth W. Hunter, Senior Associate Director, PAD, on May 28, 1981, before the National Council of Associations for Policy Sciences.

Wilma S. Larson

*Under Review
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HARRY S. HAVENS

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The Use of Policy Information and Analysis in the Congress

I agreed to speak on the subject of the [use of policy information and analysis in the Congress] when Ken Hunter, a valued friend and colleague, asked me to do so. Only afterward did I realize what I had done. There is an old saying to the effect that "fools jump in where angels fear to tread." My efforts on this occasion are likely to lend substantial support to those who have long disputed my angelic qualities.

There is a substantial body of opinion which holds that the phrase "the use of policy information and analysis in the Congress" contains a conspicuous internal contradiction. This school of thought would argue that there is no such use and never has been. Some would argue that the very nature of the Congress is antithetical to the use of rigorous analysis; that it is inherently incapable of the sort of decision processes in which rigorous analysis can be used.

It is, perhaps, needless to say that I do not belong to that school of thought. If I did, I would not be here today. Indeed, I would not have spent the past few years in GAO trying to provide policy relevant information and analysis to the Congress if I thought there were no prospects of its using the fruits of my labor.

Thus, we have two diametrically opposing points of view. I assert (and I am not alone in this) that policy information and

analysis is useful to the Congress, and is used, while others are equally firmly convinced of the opposite view. It is tempting to believe that one is right and one wrong. One might even conclude that the disagreement involves a testable hypothesis and attempt an evaluation on the issue. I recommend against that, and not because I might be proven wrong (hardly a novel experience for anyone who has spent 17 years in the policy business).

Actually, I believe the disagreement does not involve a testable hypothesis because there are too many different perceptions of what we mean by "use" and too many different standards by which to judge what each of us might consider an "acceptable" level of use.

I, for one, take a rather pragmatic view of the subject of utilization. To me, a piece of analytical work has been used if those who are in a position to make the decision to which the work is relevant have considered that work. That is, they are aware of the analysis at the time they make the decision. Obviously, it is nice when the decision is consistent with the direction indicated by the analysis, but that is not a necessary element of use.

Indeed, if we consider decision-maker agreement with the results of analysis, the sine quo non of "use," we might as well quit talking about "use" of policy-relevant analysis in any context, congressional, executive, or private. Despite

the complexities of many of our analytical processes, those processes are essentially aimed at achieving a simplified representation of reality, or what we believe reality to be. The more successful we are in making that representation of reality understandable, the more certain we can be that factors relevant to that decision have been excluded. Each factor which is excluded increases the probability that someone in a decision-making capacity will reject our representation of reality. But it is patently impossible to include all potentially relevant factors and it would be utterly impossible to explain the analysis if we attempted to do so.

There are those who yearn for the totally comprehensive analysis, an analysis so powerful that no one could ignore its implications. I suppose all analysts (and I would include myself) have a place in their hearts for that ideal. But I caution you against taking it very seriously, and not just because it is beyond our reach. That concept implies a predictability of behavior and a uniformity of values which, in my judgment, is fundamentally incompatible with a democratic political system. It is precisely the diversity of values and the unpredictability of changes in those values and accompanying behaviors which underly the need for a representative democracy. I suspect that political decision-making in a democracy will never be very neat because the values represented in the decision-making process are not, themselves, very neat. This is most apparent in the Congress because the process is

(comparatively, at least) so open to view. But I can assure you that the lack of neatness also prevails in the Executive Branch.

Given this rather confused or even chaotic (on occasion) decision structure, how should the analyst view his role? What should he seek to accomplish? My thesis is that the analyst's responsibility is to inform the decision-maker and that this responsibility rests on the premise that a better-informed decision-maker is likely to make better decisions. We should seek to add an increment of relevant information to the body of data, impressions and values which the decision-maker already brings to the issue.

I would also argue that, in the congressional context, the analytical community has been far more successful at this effort than is commonly recognized. Issues are being addressed today in the Congress with a level of understanding which I find little short of remarkable.

These issues are not simple ones. Take the case of the budget and fiscal policy. A tougher and more complex set of issues is hard to imagine. The analyst, looking at the debate, is struck by the preponderance of rhetoric. But look deeper than that and you will find that the rhetoric is based, to a remarkable degree on the substance of analysis. The analysts have done their job and done it well.

The analysis has been supplied and it has been understood. To an impressive degree, one can trace policy positions (and

even the rhetoric accompanying them) to a particular analytical base, seen from the perspective of a particular (sometimes unique) value framework. Put another way, I think it is evident that a significant number of the most important participants on both sides of the economic policy debate understand quite well what the analysis says about how to pursue the objectives to which they attach the most value.

People can, and do, quarrel over the quality of the underlying analysis, particularly when, as in this case, competing analyses reflect markedly different perceptions of reality. But one can hardly quarrel with the assertion that the analysis has been used.

I would not have made that statement in 1967, when it was evident that important elements in Congress felt truly threatened by the emphasis on evaluation and analysis accompanying PPBS. This attitude has largely dissipated in the ensuing years for several reasons. First, it quickly became abundantly clear that analysts were not the all-powerful technocrats that some had feared. Executive Branch experience showed the relative ease with which policy officials could retain control of the decision process, assuring that analysts remained in their appropriately supportive roles.

Second, (and here some of my personal biases are evident) a few key individuals set out to create institutional capabilities to provide analytic support for Congress at a time when there

was only modest evidence of congressional demand for that support. These far-sighted individuals (and former Comptroller General Staats was, at least in my view, one of the most important of them) realized that the existence of this capability would soon generate a demand for its services. The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970, with its emphasis in the analytical responsibilities of GAO and CRS, clearly embodied that view.

Third, events--specifically the confrontations over the budget between Congress and President Nixon--virtually forced the Congress to create an integrated congressional budget process. A budget process for the Federal Government simply cannot function without a strong analytical base. The process itself, to say nothing of the decisions, is just too complex. Just keeping track of the numbers is a complex analytical task. Experience with this process demonstrated, in a new context, that professional analysis can be a valued asset to elected decision-makers, not a threat.

All in all, then, I think we have come quite a distance in a rather short time. Despite occasional disparaging remarks, analysis and analysts are a recognized and accepted part of the congressional environment.

Is everything rosy? Of course not. Analysis is often used properly and effectively. But it is also sometimes used improperly. (I suspect the frequency of misuse is little, if any, greater than occurs elsewhere, but it should still be a matter of concern.) I am also troubled by inconsistency in the quality of the analysis.

Quality, of course, is a relative term, not an absolute. I am certainly not suggesting that we should strive for a uniform level of scientific rigor and precision in our work. The most I would say on that score is that we should always strive for a level of rigor and precision which is appropriate to the issue and to the context.

I am really talking about a different sort of quality, one captured in the term "professional responsibility." There is a human tendency to gild the lily.

The greater the use made of work by people in our profession, the more important it becomes that we adhere to certain principles of professional responsibility. Those principles involve reporting what we know, and what we do not know, with candor. Those principles are grounded in our sense of professionalism, but they are also essential to our survival. We simply cannot afford to stretch our conclusions to please one group, or disguise them to please another. Particularly in a congressional setting, there are too many people who are capable of detecting such distortions and motivated to expose them. Our credibility is based on the twin attributes of objectivity and skill. Once that credibility is lost, it is hard to rebuild.

Once, perhaps, few people cared about our work. It could be ignored with impunity. That is no longer true. Our work is increasingly used and increasingly visible. We worked long and hard to reach that goal. But that utility and visibility

carries with it a risk--the risk that all our efforts will have been for nought.

Adhering to principles of professional responsibility is not always easy. Those who do so will often find themselves in an uncomfortable position. But let me assure you that this discomfort is nothing compared to the pain felt by those who ignore these principles and are found out. Hell hath no fury like a Congressman who discovers he has been led down the garden path. I urge you to avoid the experience.

Thank you.